



Bold Books for Innovative Teaching: Show, Don't Tell: Graphic Novels in the Classroom

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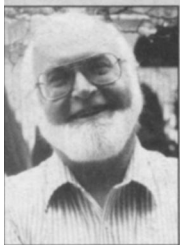
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Bold Books for Innovative Teaching

There was a time when calling a novel *graphic* meant the book was either sexually explicit or filled with gore, or both. Today, *graphic novels* are something else entirely: elaborately illustrated stories that look like high-class, book-length comics. (Of course, there are graphic graphic novels, but we'll ignore those for now.) Hailed as something between an emerging literary form and a cultural phenomenon, the graphic novel has received much acclaim during the last few years, by well-read adults as well as by teenagers reluctant to read anything without pictures. Many teachers of English language arts, however, remain unfamiliar with the wide range of choices in this genre, in part because we did not grow up with these novels, in part because our literary sentiments have been trained to avoid anything with illustrations, and in part because many of us haven't known where to start investigating this fascinating new field. Because I have no expertise with graphic novels, I invited one of the genre's most knowledgeable people, Stephen Weiner, to give us a brief description of graphic novels and to recommend several titles with connections to traditional English literature.

Show, Don't Tell: Graphic Novels in the Classroom

by Stephen Weiner

While many books published as graphic novels are collections of stories that we've come to regard as typical comic-book fare, such as *Batman* or *Mai, the Psychic Girl*, since the late 1970s there has been an impulse within the comic-book industry to move beyond genre material and create stories that are more similar to what are generally accepted as works of literature. This impulse has produced a significant number of literary and educational graphic novels, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), which have been used successfully as one component of educational curricula.

The term *graphic novel* includes genre fiction, such as superhero and horror stories, as well as nonfiction and literary stories, such as Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1998), a teen coming-of-age story, and Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan the Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), a publication that was awarded England's prestigious Guardian Award in 2001. Until recently, graphic

novels were almost exclusively brought out by comic-book publishing houses, making them unknown to the general reader and difficult to purchase.

Several complementary elements gelled at the same time, bringing graphic novels to the forefront of popular culture since the early 1980s:

- > A growing number of "literary" graphic novels have been published.
- > The movie industry has inspired more interest in superhero comics (*Spider-Man*, *Catwoman*, *The Hulk*, *Hellboy*).
- > Novelists have been using the comic-book industry as the impetus for serious novels.
- > Journalists have been writing articles about the changing field of comics, both in book-industry trade journals and magazines aimed at general readers.

In addition, during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the quality of writing in superhero comics improved, and manga—Japanese-style graphic novels—found their way into chain bookstores in a big way. All this attention has given graphic novels a sort of hip appeal.

The format of comics combines the appeal of words and pictures. A well-done graphic novel offers the immediacy of the prose reading experience, with the pictures and the words working simultaneously, making a graphic novel not only something one reads but something one *sees* as well, like reading and watching a movie at the same time. Only the movie isn't on a screen, it's on the page in the reader's hands. One important distinction between comic books such as *Archie* or *Superman* and most graphic novels is the production values: generally, graphic novels are printed on higher-quality paper and are better colored than their comic-book counterparts, making the bound book more attractive than the magazine.

Graphic novels vary in type, but they may be viewed as long comic books, bound so they might be read like prose books. The books range in length from 48 to 224 pages, and there may be as many as 180 words on a page. Therefore, a 175-page graphic novel might contain approximately 31,500 words.

Well-done graphic novels offer teachers another tool to be used in the classroom and can enrich the students' experiences as a new way of imparting information, serving as transitions into more print-intensive works, enticing reluctant readers into prose books and, in some cases, offering literary experiences that linger in the mind long after the book is finished.

Because of the popularity of superheroes, such as Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four, innovative educators have been using comics as a lure for reluctant readers since the 1970s. Today's graphic novels offer a wider array of choices that might prove useful in the classroom.

Recommended Graphic Novels

One genre in graphic-novel publishing is autobiography. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and *Maus II* are widely recognized as the best examples of a graphic novel. Portraying Jews as mice and Nazis as cats, and recipient of a special Pulitzer Prize, *Maus* took Spiegelman thirteen years to create and tells three stories simultaneously: (1) the trials Spiegelman's parents, Vladek and Anna, endured while surviving Nazi concentration camps; (2) the story of Vladek's life after World War II, as he is still reliving the war; and (3) the story of Art Spiegelman himself, who struggles against his family history. Spiegelman's achievement is so spectacular because the cartoon format is absolutely necessary to the telling of the tale. If *Maus* were a prose novel its impact would be weaker.

A book that many have come to see as a companion to *Maus* is Marjane Satrapi's unflinching memoir of growing up in Iran. *Persepolis: The*



From *PERSEPOLIS: THE STORY OF A CHILDHOOD* by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Mattias Ripa & Blake Ferris, copyright © 2003 by L'Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books.

Story of a Childhood (New York: Pantheon, 2003) details both the horrors and the humanity of growing up with an inquisitive mind under a militaristic, religious regime.

In *Our Cancer Year* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994), writers Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner present an account of Harvey Pekar's battle with cancer. Through a combination of controlled text and muted drawings, the reader is guided through the steps of Pekar's recovery process without becoming horrified. *Our Cancer Year* gives a human face to the battle with cancer. The book could be used as a springboard for a discussion of health topics, responses to illness and, because it's a graphic novel, visual presentation.

Of course, graphic novels can impart more than autobiographical information. One example that is often used in classrooms is Scott McCloud's seminal work, *Understanding Comics* (New York: Harper, 1994), which dissects, theorizes, and explains in a breezy, almost hypnotic presentation how the comic medium works. The book gives an overview of the history of comics and discusses their relationship to other forms of expression. The magic of McCloud's book is that it combines fresh information with a fast-paced, thought-provoking read.

One book especially suitable for classrooms is *Palestine* by Joe Sacco (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1996), which delivers a powerful meditation on the Middle Eastern conflict. A self-described "cartoon journalist," Sacco weaves some elements of new journalism cartoon-style into this account detailing his several visits to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Rick Geary gives a history lesson while focusing on familial violence

in *The Borden Tragedy: A Memoir of the Infamous Double Murder at Fall River, Mass., 1892* (New York: NBM, 1997).



From *THE BORDEN TRAGEDY: A MEMOIR OF THE INFAMOUS DOUBLE MURDER AT FALL RIVER, MASS., 1892* © Rick Geary. All rights reserved, used by permission.

Finally, Osamu Tezuka's *Adolf: A Tale of the Twentieth Century* (San Francisco: Viz, 1996) tells the story of three Adolfs: the Nazi dictator, a Jew living in Japan, and a half-Aryan. Loyalty, betrayal, and responsibility to others are recurring themes in this historical drama.

Literary adaptation is one of the standbys of the graphic-novel medium. These books might be used as introductions to the literary works in their original form as well as providing worthwhile reading experiences in their own right. They might also be used in conjunction with other types of adaptations, such as film. The work of Franz Kafka, for example, has particular currency in the field. In addition to publishing adaptations of Kafka's work, well-known artist Robert Crumb illustrated a full-length cartoon biography of Kafka, *Introducing Kafka* (written by David Zane Mairowitz; Lanham: Totem, 2000). Artist Peter Kuper offers a chilling version of *The Metamorphosis* (New



From *THE METAMORPHOSIS* by Peter Kuper, copyright © 2003 by Peter Kuper. Used by permission of Crown Publishers.

York: Crown, 2003). Told in black-and-white scratchboard illustrations with little dialogue, Kuper ably captures the alienation so essential to the original story. Kuper has made a side career of adapting prominent novels into comics format, and another of his books to consider using is Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (New York: NBM, 2004).

In recent years, it has become fashionable to rewrite classic stories from the point of view of a secondary character. A good example of a prose novel that rewrites a classic is Gregory Maguire's *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (New York: Regan, 1995). The same impulse has also been explored in the graphic-novel industry with surprising results. Neil Gaiman's celebrated graphic-novel series, *Sandman*, focuses on Sandman, ruler of the dream world and, invoking elements of horror, fantasy, history, and mythology, uses William Shakespeare as a character. In *Sandman: Dream Country* (New York: DC Comics, 1991), the story "A Midsummer Night's Dream," which won a World Fantasy award for best short story, traces Shakespeare's skills as a playwright back to a bar-

gain he made with the Lord of Dreams. *Dream Country* will also interest students because it presents a comic-book script without any illustrations. Although the *Sandman* stories are interconnected, the stories in this volume may be read without prior knowledge of the series.

Finally, Will Eisner's *Fagin the Jew: A Graphic Novel* (New York: Random, 2003) substantiates the Dickens character and might be used as an introduction or a post-script to *Oliver Twist*. The book also includes a brief history of British anti-Semitism.

Moving beyond bridges and introductions to classics and into literature created in comics format, the graphic-novel field offers other rewarding work. Some of the best examples of literary graphic novels concern themselves with themes perfectly attuned to adolescent sensibilities and interests. *Ghost World* by Daniel Clowes (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1998), which has also been adapted into a film, features teens Becky, Enid, and Josh and explores their attachment to each other as well as their vague sense of ambition during the summer immediately after high school graduation. The illustrations are grainy and support the feeling of alienation that the characters express, and the resolution is both shocking and true to the story line.

Exploring an even harder adolescent feeling, Chester Brown's *I Never Liked You: A Comic Book* (Montreal, QC: Drawn and Quarterly, 2002) articulates the helplessness that teens often experience while looking ahead to participating in adult society. As in *Maus*, the book's design effectively works with the text to present not only a story line but a mood and atmosphere as well.

Jason Lutes's taut graphic novel, *Jar of Fools* (Montreal, QC: Drawn

and Quarterly, 1997), tells the tale of Ernie, a capable magician who has lost his sense of purpose after his older brother's apparent suicide. Ernie falls in with a traveling con man, the con-man's daughter, and the con-man's on-the-lam ex-girlfriend. Help finally comes to Ernie in the form of his old magic teacher, Al Flosso, who recently escaped from a nursing home with no intention of returning. As the book ends, Ernie and Al take to the road, in a manner similar to the characters in Kerouac's novel *On the Road*. Cartoonist Lutes is a subtle writer and an evocative illustrator. Despite its difficult subject, *Jar of Fools* reads effortlessly.

One last type of literary graphic novel is the wordless narrative. Eric Drooker's *Flood! A Novel in Pictures* (Portland: Dark Horse Comics, 2002) follows the tradition of wordless novels such as Frans Masereel's *The City* (New York: Schocken, 1988). In *Flood!* a junkie is laid off, has a brief love affair, and then returns to his loft to create the book *Flood!* the hypnotic, surrealistic book that the reader holds.

No discussion of graphic novels would be complete without noting the readability of the format and its potential as a lure for reluctant readers. When using graphic novels as vehicles intended to keep students reading, it's best to stick with well-done, popular work. In the field, popular work often has a fantastic element. Below are five books recommended for reluctant readers.

In *Bone: Out from Boneville* (Columbus: Cartoon, 1995), Jeff Smith's original nine-volume and gender-crossing fantasy series imposes three Pogo-like characters,

the Bone cousins, in a more traditional fantasy tale about the battle between good and evil. Smith invokes numerous Western mythic patterns and initially mixes the absurdity of the Bone cousins' helplessness with the dramatic tension necessary to produce a convincing heroic fantasy. Amazingly, the Bone cousins grow into realized characters as the series evolves.

In *Mai, the Psychic Girl: Perfect Collection* (San Francisco: Viz, 1995), Japanese cartoonist Kazuya Kudo tells the horrifying and absurd story of Mai, who appears to be like most fourteen-year-olds except for her psychic abilities. Initially, Mai thinks her special powers are useful primarily for her own enjoyment, but when her father is threatened, she learns that she must use her powers for a higher purpose.

Ultimate Spider-Man: Power and Responsibility (New York: Marvel Comics, 2001) by Bill Jemas, Brian Michael Bendis, and Mark Bagley retells the origin of Spider-Man, which is the basis for the current crop of Spider-Man movies. This version makes the character more appealing to today's teenagers by highlighting how strange it would be if one woke up one day with superpowers but still lived a normal life and had regular teenage problems.

Jack Kirby's graphic novel, *Jack Kirby's New Gods* (New York: DC Comics, 1998), presents a raw heroic fantasy, focusing on the humorless tragic hero.

Finally, *ElfQuest* (New York: DC Comics, 2003) by husband-and-wife team Richard and Wendy Pini, published both as a hardcover and in a manga-style paperback edition, is



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an example of how the comics format can successfully utilize fantasy themes. In *ElfQuest*, a race of elves tries to master the conflict between its half-animal and half-human sides. The story line focuses on Chief Cutter, who is able to control his animalistic instincts enough to lead his nomadic tribe in the search for their true homeland.

Stories told in comic-book format also have other uses. By playing with the presentation, both narrative and dialogue writing might be taught. You could, for example, duplicate a short story and blot out the dialogue on the last five pages, then have the students read the story and write their own ending. To encourage narrative description, teachers could copy part of a story, eliminate the illustrations but include the dialogue for the last several pages, and ask students to describe the characters' actions.

By opening the door and letting graphic novels into your classroom, you're bringing in a new world for students to explore.

Stephen Weiner, director of the Maynard Public Library in Maynard, Massachusetts, holds a master's degree in children's literature. He has been writing about comic art since 1992 and has published articles and reviews in *Voice of Youth Advocates*, *Library Journal*, *School Library Journal*, and *Public Libraries*. His books include *Bring an Author to Your Library* (Hagerstown: Alleyside, 1993), *The 101 Best Graphic Novels* (New York: NBM, 2001), *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel* (NBM, 2003), and *The Will Eisner Companion* (New York: DC Comics, 2004).